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Connie L. Cannon says her mother, a Glenwood Park resident, "was a perfectly healthy woman who never smoked and never drank. T one day she came down with cancer and six months later she was gone. Her oncologist said it was environmentally related."

Norfolk area fears pattern in 48 cases

By Cyril T. Zaneski and Tom Holden
Staff writers

NORFOLK — Rich and Connie L. Cannon can name a dozen or so friends in Glenwood Park who have had cancer. For some, it attacked the kidney. Others had cancer of the liver or the lungs. All of them are dead.

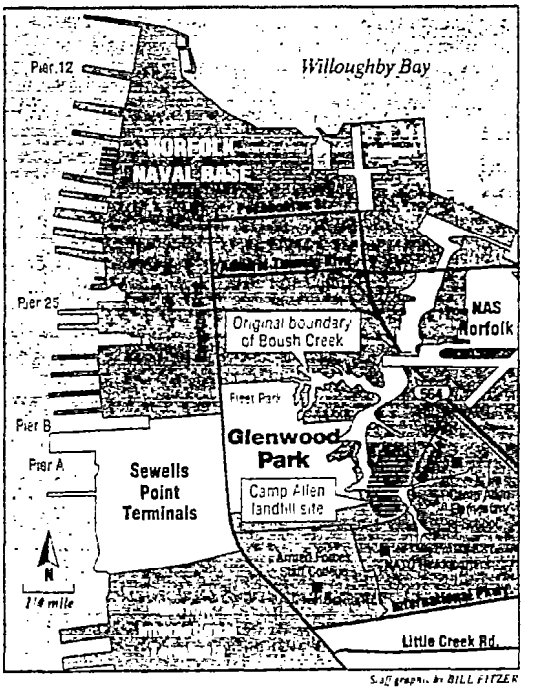
Sad as it was, they thought it was just coincidence, the kind of thing that happens to older people — until Connie's mother developed a tumor on her right kidney.

"My mother was a perfectly healthy woman who never smoked and never drank," Connie Cannon said last week from her home in Virginia Beach. "Then one day she came down with cancer, and six months later she was gone. . . . Her oncologist said it was environmentally related."

The death of Beulah Violet Barnes, 65, a lifelong resident of Glenwood Park, made the Cannons wonder whether there was a connection. They talked to old friends in the Sewells Point neighborhood and over time developed a list of 48 neighbors who had been diagnosed with cancers.

They also identified a likely suspect: an old Navy toxic waste dump a few hundred feet from the neighborhood. Was the dump leaking pollution and making people sick? They were certain the connection was strong.

So they went to their congressman, Rep. Owen B. Pickett, and their state representative, Del. George H. Heilig Jr., and asked for help. Both quickly enlisted the help of the Navy and the Virginia Department of Health.



Staff graphic by BILL FITZER

The dump, the Camp Allen landfill, is indeed contaminating groundwater under the neighborhood, the Navy says. But the pollution is 50 feet or more below ground level, under the shallow water that residents draw for irriga their lawns and gardens, Navy officials saic

Responding to residents' concerns, Navy last summer sampled water from wells in the neighborhood. They found contaminated wells — all drawing from s low groundwater supplies that the Navy have not been polluted by the dump. No v in the neighborhood supply drinking water, cials and residents said.

One compound that causes cancer, v chloride, and another suspected of cau cancer, 1,2-dichloroethane, were among pc ants in the contaminated wells, Navy offi said.

But two studies by a state health inves tor found no link between the toxic dump cancers in the neighborhood. The secon those studies will be presented to the G wood Park civic league Tuesday night.

C. Diane Woolard, the senior epidemiol who conducted the studies, said the rat cancers in the neighborhood of 638 househ is not high. After all, she said, one in t Americans gets cancer over a lifetime.

"Breast and lung cancer, which are most common types of cancer nationally, l also been the most frequently diagnosed in community," she wrote in her most recen port. "Most of the persons with cancer in neighborhood are over 50, the age grou which cancer is most commonly detected."

Because residents do not use wells

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drinking water, it is difficult to determine how they would be exposed to contaminants in large enough doses to cause cancer, she said. Further, there is no way to account for an individual's personal lifestyle, such as smoking and drinking, or whether the person has a genetic predisposition to cancer.

Vinyl chloride causes a form of liver cancer not diagnosed in Glenwood Park, Woolard said. The other compound, 1,2-dichloroethane, is known to depress the central nervous system and cause gastrointestional problems but has not been proven to cause cancer, she said.

The other compounds in the well water were 1,2-dichlorethene and trichloroethene, neither of which is associated with cancer, Woolard wrote in her most recent report.

Woolard acknowledged in an interview that she did not have enough information about cancers in Glenwood Park to go beyond the statistical analyses she conducted for her reports last September and this past July. The list of 48 names of people diagnosed as having cancer, for example, did not specify whether they lived on just a couple blocks or were spread throughout the subdivision, she said. Nor did it specify when their cancers were diagnosed.

It would make a significant difference if all 48 lived in the same block or if all got cancer in one year, she said.

Of the 48 names on the list, only 21 were reported in the Virginia Tumor Registry between 1975 and 1989, Woolard said. Eighty-one percent of them were older than 50 when diagnosed, she said.

Michael Greenberg, a Rutgers University epidemiologist, has investigated claims of cancer clusters being caused by toxic waste dumps and other pollution across the country. In his 25 years as an epidemiologist, he said, he has never seen data to support the claim that pollution can cause cancer.

The consensus among epidemiologists, he said, is that 2 percent to 5 percent of cancer cases nationwide may be caused by pollution or environmental factors, but that the overwhelming majority of those cases probably are occupational.

Many in the neighborhood question Woolard's conclusions.

"Something's *got* to be causing this cancer," said Virginia Shell, whose 81-year-old brother, a former neighborhood resident, died of cancer last month. "There have been so many cancers around Glenwood Park, and it's gotten worse the last five or six years."

Connie Cannon, who moved from Glenwood Park in 1973 yet remained in touch with friends and her mother, still wonders.

"The woman who lived behind us in Glenwood Park died of breast cancer and a man across the street from my mother died of stomach cancer," she said. "It's just so many cancers. I'm not a scientist, but I know when I was talking to my mother's oncologist he said it was environmentally related."

The residents' suspicion is linked to what they have seen happen to land, water and wetlands around them over the past 50 years.

Glenwood Park began developing just after the turn of the century. The neighborhood grew to its current size of 638 houses in the years after World War II. Today, it is bounded by naval facilities — and landfills.

During World War II, in a rush to expand the naval base, the Navy filled Boush Creek, a two-mile tidal gut that connected the neighborhood with Willoughby Bay, with load upon load of mud, debris and trash. And periodically since then, salt marshes have been filled for new development until state and federal laws passed in 1972 regulated the destruction of wetlands.

"We're surrounded by five or seven different landfills," said one neighborhood resident. "I'll tell you, everybody in the city of Norfolk put something out here."

Of greatest concern to the residents and the Navy is the Camp Allen landfill, a 45-acre dump on what was formerly Boush Creek and its marshes east of Glenwood Park. The dump is separated from the neighborhood and an adjacent Navy housing project by a drainage ditch.

Between the 1940s and 1974, the Navy used the pit for dumping waste oil, asbestos, organic solvents, paint stripping wastes, metal plating sludges, waste chemicals, pesticides, scrap metal, ash from burned garbage and coal, and demolition debris.

The landfill is among six at the base being studied under a program for cleaning up toxic waste dumps on Department of Defense land. The dump has been leaching nine chemical compounds into the open ditches that surround it, according to two engineering studies conducted by consultants for the Navy. The contaminants — mostly components of solvents — include vinyl chloride and another known cancer-causing agent, benzene, and the suspected carcinogens 1,2-dichloroethane and toluene.

All the compounds are found in trace amounts and quickly evaporate in sunlight, said Cherryl Barnett, the naval base's director of environmental programs. "We don't believe concentrations are high enough to be a concern," she said.

Monitoring at seven wells at the site, however, indicates that chromium, zinc, silver, lead and phenols in the groundwater occasionally exceed state standards, the 1988 engineering report on the dump said.

In the meantime, public health officials will try to convince residents of Glenwood Park that their health problems are not unusual. State health officials receive about 25 reports from people who suspect that their community has an unusually high rate of cancer, said Woolard, who has been a state disease detective for six years. But none of the so-called "cancer clusters" have been proven to be caused by environmental factors, she said.

"It's understandably frightening when you're surrounded by people who've gotten sick," Woolard said in an interview. "You look around your neighborhood and you think: 'There's cancer in this house and that house and that house.'

"You just tend to discover cancers where you have older people who talk openly about their health."

But the worry remains.

"I don't know what kind of legacy we're leaving for our children," said Cannon, who became a grandmother in December. "Having nursed someone with cancer, you just don't know how horrid that disease is."